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FOR IBS VOA COVERAGE DESK ATTENTION AFRICAN DIVISION PASS
IPS AFRICA BRANCH

BAMENDA, CAMEROON, DECEMBER 12 - THE SACRED AFO-A-KOM STATUE, MISSING FOR SEVEN YEARS, RESTS AGAIN IN THE ROYAL SHRINE OF THE FON (OR GREAT CHIEF2 OF THE KOM PEOPLE IN THE MOUNTAIN FASTNESS OF LAIKOM FROM WHICH IT WAS STOLEN IN 1966.

THE RETURN OF THE CENTURY-OLD 5 FOOT, 4 INCH CARVED WOODEN STATUE ENCASED IN A BEADED SUIT OF SEMI-PRECIOUS STONES AND WITH ITS GREAT GRAVE FACE SHEATHED IN DARK COPPER, MARKS THE END OF A REMARK-ABLE EPIC IN WHICH A PRECIOUS EXAMPLE OF TRADITIONAL AFIRCAN ART WAS TAKEN FROM A PEOPLE FOR WHOM IT HAD GREAT RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE REMOVED FROM CAMEROON BY CLANDESTINE MEANS, AND PASSED THROUGH SEVERAL COUNTRIES AND SEVERAL HANDS. IT EVENTUALLY WAS ACQUIRED BY A RESPECTED ART DEALER IN THE UNITED STATES. IT IS A DRAMATIC STORY IN WHICH A GREAT AMERICAN NEWSPAPER,--TH NEW YORK TIMES-- INFORMED OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS LONG-LOST TRIUMPH OF TRADITION-NAL ART, BROKE THE STORY TO THE WORLD, PAVING THE WAY FOR THE RECOVERY OF THE STATUE THROUGH PRIVATE AMERICAN DONATIONS, AND ITS ULTIMATE RETURN TO CAMEROON AND TO THE PEOPLE OF THE KOM KINGDOM.

ON NOVEMBER 30, AFTER HAVING BEEN ON DISPLAY IN THE MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART IN WASHINGTON FOR SEVERAL DAYS, IT WAS FORMALLY HANDED
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OVER TO THE CAMEROONIAN AMBASSADOR IN WASHINGTON AND ON DECEMBER 3 IT WAS FLOWN BACK TO CAMEROON. THE ARRIVAL OF THIS SACRED ART OBJECT IN YAOUNDE, THE CAMEROONIAN CAPITAL, WAS MARKED BY FORMAL CELEBRATIONS AT THE HIGHEST GOVERNMENTAL LEVELS.

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THE MEMBERS OF THE AMERICAN CULTURAL DELEGATION, REPRESENTING THE ORGANIZATION THAT HAD PLAYED THE KEY ROLE IN NEGOTIATING AND ARRANGING THE FINANCING FOR RECOVERY OF THE STATUE, MR. WARREN ROBBINS, DIRECTOR, AND MR. GEORGE SPICELY, PROGRAM DIRECTOR OF THE MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART, AND A PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTOR, MR. LAWRENCE GUSSMAN, WHO IS PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR THE ALBERT SCHWEITZER HOSPITAL, WERE DECORATED BY THE CAMEROONIAN GOVERNMENT AND LATER RECEIVED IN AUDIANCE BY HIS EXCELLENCY EL HADJU AHMADOU AHIDJO, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON, TO WHOM THEY DELIVERED A PERSONAL LETTER FROM PRESIDENT NIXON. THE FON OF KOM, BOBE-MEYA, TRAVELLED TO YAOUNDE WITH HIS COUNSELORS AND MEMBERS OF HIS COURT AND PERSONALLY EXAMINED THE GREAT STATUE AND TESTIFIED AS TO ITS AUTHENTICITY IN A DRAMA-PACKED SCENE DURING A GREAT RECEPTION IN THE CAPITAL.

"YES, IT IS THE AFO-A-KOM," THE RULER SAID, SPEAKING IN THE KOM LANGUAGE THROUGH AN INTERPRETER. HE PEERED INTENTLY AND PASSED HIS HANDS OVER THE HEAD AND PARTS OF THE TORSO. "IT IS INDEED "THE KOM THING. ABSOLUTELY, IT IS IN TRUTH WHAT WAS TAKEN AWAY."

ON MONDAY, DECEMBER 10, AFTER HAVING BEEN DISPLAYED IN THE NATIONAL TOURIST OFFICE IN YAOUNDE THE AFO-A-KOM STATUE WAS TRANSPORTED BY A CAMEROONIAN AIR FORCE CARIBOU PLANE TO THIS SPRAWLING CAPITAL CITY OF THE NORTH WEST PROVINCE. THEN ON TUESDAY, IT WAS TRANSPORTED BY ROAD TO FUNDONG, THE DISTRICT TOWN, HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS, SOME 80 KILOMETERS (50 MILES) TO THE NORTH OF BAMENDA. IT WAS ACCOMPANIED BY CAMEROONS MINISTER OF INFORMATION AND CULTURE MR. VROUMSIA TCHINAYE (VROOM-SEEYAW CHEEN-EYE), THE GOVERNOR OF NORTH WEST PROVINCE, MR. GUILLAUME NSEKE, NUMEROUS OTHER NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL DIGNITARIES, THE AMERICAN CULTURAL DELEGATION, AND REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CAMEROONIAN AND AMERICAN PRESS AND RADIO.

FOR MILE AFTER MILE ALONG THE STEEP AND WINDING COURSE THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS ON THE APPROACHES TO FUNDONG -- AT MBINGO, AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE KINGDOM, AT BELO, AT NJINIKOM, AND AT LITTLE

ROADSIDE CLUSTERS OF HOUSES ALONG THE WAY, THOUSANDS OF KOM PEOPLE WHO HAD COME DOWN OUT OF THE HILLS DANCED, SHOUTED, WAVED AND FIRED THEIR ANCIENT DANE GUNS INTO THE AIR. THE WORD WAS OUT, AND ECHOING ACROSS THE DEEP VALLEYS FROM HIGH UP ON THE MOUNTAINS ONE COULD HEAR THE SHOUTS AND CHANTING OF THE KOM FARMERS AND HERDSMEN.

AT FUNDONG A GREAT FIELD WAS PACKED WITH SOME 4,000 KOM PEOPLE WHO HAD COME INTO THE TOWN TO WITNESS THE RETURN OF THE LEGENDARY STATUE. MINISTER VROUMSIYA TCHINAYE, SPEAKING IN FRENCH, WITH HIS WORDS TRANSLATED INTO PIDGIN, VOICED HIS GRATITUDE TO THE NEW YORK TIMES WHICH HAD REVEALED THE EXISTENCE OF THE LONG-MISSING STATUE IN AMERICA AND TO THE AMERICAN "MEOPLE OF GOOD WILL" WHO HAD RAIS THE MONEY TO PURCHASE IT AND ASSURE ITS RETURN TO CAMEROON.

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ASSERTING THAT" IT IS THE POLICY OF THE GOVERNMENT TO
PROTECT THE NATIONAL HERITAGE," HE CAUTIONED THE PEOPLE AGAINST
LETTING SUCH FINE TRADITIONAL OBJECTS AS THE AFO-A-KOM BE TAKEN
FROM THE COUNTRY, AND URGED THEM TO "GUARD SUCH THINGS JEALOUSLY."
HE ADDED THAT THE CAMEROON GOVERNMENT EARNESTLY DESIRES THE RETURN OF
TRADITIONAL ART OBJECTS TAKEN FROM THE COUNTRY "EVEN BEFORE
INDEPENDENCE."

STATING THAT THE AFO-A-KOM MUST NOW SERVE AS A SYMBOL OF NATIONAL
UNITY, MR. TCHINAYE SAID: " THIS STATUE, EVEN THOUGH IT ORIGINATED
HERE (IN THE KOM KINGDOM) NO LONGER BELONGS ONLY TO THE KOM TRIBE...
IT IS NOW THE PROPERTY OF ALL CAMEROONIANS." AGAIN AND AGAIN, THE
MINISTER EMPHASIZED THE GOVERNMENTS RESPECT FOR TRIBAL TRADITION
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CAMEROONIAN "NATIONAL UNITY OFR WHICH WE HAVE
SO ARDUOUSLY STRUGGLED."

THE STATUE WAS THEN TAKEN FROM THE CASE IN WHICH IT HAD
TRAVELLED ACROSS THE ATLANTIC AND DISPLAYED TO THE KOM PEOPLE. THERE
FOLLOWED A SCENE OF REJOICING THAT CONTINUED UNBRIDLED FOR MORE
THAN AN HOUR. VILLAGE CHIEFS AND THEIR SONS AND MEN FROM THE SURROUN-
DING MOUNTAINS, WAVED THEIR ANCIENT FLINT-LOCK LONG-GUNS IN THE AIR,
FIRED VOLLEY AFTER VOLLEY, AND ADVANCED AND RETREATED AGAIN AND
AGAIN IN THE PRESENCE OF THE AFO-A-KOM. CHANTING, DANCING THRONGS OF
WOMEN AND CHILDREN CAME IN REPEATED WAVES TO BOW BEFORE THE FON.
THE AIR WAS FILLED WITH SHRIEKS OF JOY AND THE LONG, HIGH-PITCHED
CHANTS OF THE AFRICAN HILL PEOPLE.

A CORTEGE OF LANDROVERS TRANS PORTED THE AFO-A-KOM UP THE WINDING
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TRAIL 7 KILOMETERS TO THE MOUNTAIN FASTNESS OF LAIKOM, AND THERE IN
THE INNER COURT OF THE FONS COMPOUND, CARVED OUT OF THE MOUNTAPN-
SIDE HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO, THE AFO-A-KOM WAS PLACED AT THE FOOT OF
THE FONS THRONE. IT WAS NOT TAKEN OUT OF ITS CASE THERE.
THE GRAND UNVEILING OF "THE FON THING" IS TO TAKE PLACE ON FRIDAY,
14TH. IT IS THE OCCASION OF THE ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF THE KOM PEOPLE
AT WHICH THEIR SACRED TREASURES ARE DISPLAYED ONCE A YEAR. IT IS
THE TIME OF RENEWAL.. THE PEOPLE SAY AT LAIKOM THAT THINGS WERE
NEVER THE SAME AFTER THE AFO-A-KOM DISAPPEARED. THE CROPS HAVE BEEN
POOR AND THERE HAS BEEN MUCH DISSENSION AND QUARRELING AMONG THE
PEOPLE. NOW , THEY SAY, ALL WILL BE WELL AGAIN. THE SACRED AFO-A-KOM
HAS COME HOME AGAIN. ITEM.
BACHE

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